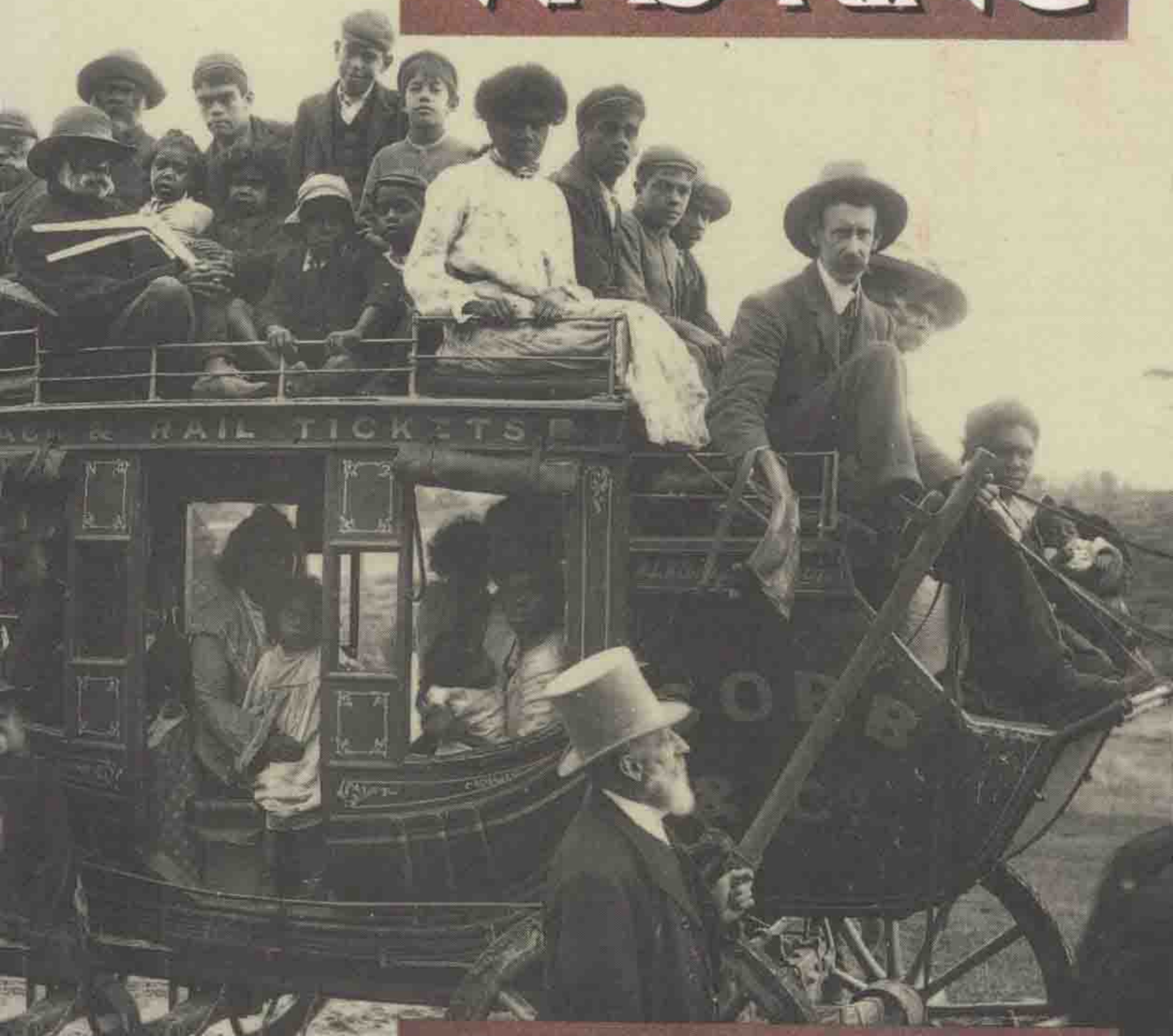
Romance
and High Adventure

Eden

WILL LAWSON

WHEN COBB & CO. WAS KING



THE COLOURFUL STORY
OF AUSTRALIA'S
COACHING DAYS

WHEN COBB & CO. WAS KING

WILL LAWSON

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DEDICATION

To the coaching days
When the wheels spun round
When the teams of greys
And the bays were sound—
Skewbalds and creams,
Roans and blacks
And the motley teams
Of the old bush tracks . . .

Here's to the drivers
Who made 'em go,
Crossing high rivers
In sun or snow,
Or lonely plains
Where 'lighthouse' beams
Were like long reins
To guide the teams,
Through the dark nights
Or the dawn's soft glow . . .

Here's to the lights
Of Cobb and Co.!

Will Lawson

AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THE SECOND EDITION

THIS story is written round the history of Cobb and Co., from the time that firm was brought under the control of James Rutherford, who came to Sydney at the same time as the Cobb brothers in 1852. After some years of wandering in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, James Rutherford joined the company which took over Cobb and Co., when the Cobb brothers returned to America after having made a fortune in seven years. James Rutherford was general manager of the new company. One of his first decisions was to extend the line to New South Wales, and eventually it went to Queensland. "Follow the Gold" was his motto. He also provided full passenger and mail services wherever the line operated. In Bathurst, where he lived for fifty years, his name is still a household word and his works to improve the city are still manifest, though he died in 1911, a year before the last Cobb and Co.'s coach ran—from Yeulba to Surat, in Queensland.

The idea of writing a book about Cobb and Co. came to me in 1923 in Bourke where I spent some days in the company of William Williamson who, with his brothers, had owned the coaches out west before Cobb and Co. came. When an amalgamation was arranged between him and Cobb and Co. in the seventies, he became the western manager of the firm and had vivid experiences, many of which he has related to me.

I was also given information by the late Frank Smiley, for years president of Cobb and Co.'s Old Drivers' Association in Melbourne. The character of Buster White is based largely on Smiley's experiences in Victoria. And from John Drayton, famous journalist, and now, also, gathered to his fathers, I gleaned much of the humorous and human notes in this story. I also acknowledge the help with the manuscript given me by Mrs Dulcie Wills.

The story of the first official Melbourne Cup is taken from records in the Mitchell Library. These records state that the first actual Cup—an unofficial Melbourne Cup—was won by

Phoebe in 1860, a year before Archer won the first official Cup. The driving of eight-in-hands on to the course by Cobb and Co., is taken from fact; also the story of the Leviathan coach, drawn by twenty-two horses with outriders on the leaders. Later that coach was taken to Adelaide, where for some years it ran to Glenelg, but was discarded as too cumbersome.

The famous driver Ned Devine, mentioned in the account of the dinner given by James Rutherford to his drivers, was a Tasmanian. He ended his coaching days in Western Australia, on the Norseman Track, when Fred Plush, of Renmark, took horses and coaches from Bendigo to run a service to the new mines in 1900, for Sidney Kidman. Ned Devine's mortal remains lie in Ballarat cemetery and every year a pilgrimage is made by members of Cobb's Old Drivers' Association to his grave—a tribute also to Cobb and Co.'s memory which will never fade.

Of the old coaches few remain, but there are well-preserved specimens in the Melbourne Museum and at Bathurst. In other places, smaller specimens are to be seen. The big "jack" coaches carried forty-six passengers, representing a load of about four tons. Five horses used to pull this at an average speed of ten miles an hour. But they were good horses, heavy enough to pull and light enough to travel well.

I thank again all those who helped me in writing this story.

WILL LAWSON

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CHAPTER I

The Boy Who Knew Horses

THE night coach from Hamilton to Ballarat with Cabbage-Tree Tom driving swung across the bridge over the river at Skipton and trotted with a pleasant jingle of harness and hum of wheels to Cobb and Co.'s stables behind the hotel. Skipton was a change station thirty-three miles from Ballarat and two-thirds of the way along this 112-mile run. As the weary horses drew up, snorting and impatient to be out of their harness, the rising sun tipped the leaves of the gum-trees with gold, and made the little township seem a midget city set in a world of hills and trees. Weary passengers, stiff with sitting up all night, cast off rugs and wraps and got down to stretch and yawn in the sunlight which was beginning to flood the world. A rich smell of malt and beer and stables mingled in the misty morning air with the cheering odours of eggs and bacon, steak and onions, and other breakfast dishes.

This route across the hills of Victoria linked many small mining centres, of which Skipton was one, though its farming industry promised to rival the gold. Other places where gold was found near by were Linton and Scarsdale, some miles farther on. But it was mainly as a trunk line connecting Ballarat and Hamilton that this coach service was important. Fairly fast time was made, and it was important to have good teams.

As the five bays which had run the seventeen miles from Streatham were led away, a team of nondescript colours was

brought out. Cabbage-Tree Tom's face darkened, and his smile vanished.

"Say," he drawled, "who in Cain told you I wanted these *pintos*?"

The scorn in his deep voice made the two men who led the horses look at him with concern. Tom was a pioneer driver of the line, one of those experts with the whip and reins who came out from California in 1852 to start Cobb and Co. in Victoria. An artist at his work, and a keen lover of good horses, his displeasure was not a thing to be incurred lightly. Freeman Cobb, the founder of the line in Australia, had been a bosom friend of his, and the managers everywhere deferred to Cabbage-Tree Tom.

"Can't a man ever get the team he wants at this station?" Tom went on, his deep voice slowed down by his drawl. "Don't any of you fellers know one horse by name? I asked for Prince an' Nigger in the wheel, an' Star an' June an' Bunty in the lead an' look-a-here, you've brought me Jupiter an' Hercules, an' Jim an' Tommy an' Carmen!"

The leading groom, as he backed the wheel-horses against the pole, looked uncomfortable. He was a wizened Cockney with the pertness of his kind.

" 'Ow kin we 'elp it?" he said. "I've only bin 'ere three weeks an' the sime wi' these others. They change the grooms 'ere as fast as they do the 'orses. 'Ow kin we know 'orses we've never seen?"

The man who held the leaders did not speak. He was an Australian, hard-faced, with a broken nose. His name was Wingy Jim, and he was one of the crack pugilists of Victoria in his day. All kinds of men found work with Cobb and Co.

Cabbage-Tree Tom was climbing to his high seat on the big jack coach, still cherishing a grievance about his team. As he gathered up his reins while the two grooms stood at the heads of the fresh horses passengers hurried into their places on the coach, and a stir of movement began to be felt in the yard. The slow voice went on:

"Ain't there nobody at all, hereabouts, that knows the horses?

Surely a driver can get the teams he wants when he wants them. This ain't Colac where we break them in as we go. . . ."

"There's young Buster White 'ere," Sam Grey, the groom, said, indicating a freckled youngster of about fourteen years, who stood with big eyes watching the huge mail-coach as if it was the hub around which the world revolved. " 'E knows 'em all, but 'e's only a kid, though he looks big enough."

"That fellow over there, d'ye mean?" Tom asked. "Here, you kid! Come here!"

The boy, wondering at being selected for conversation by the great man who drove his coach all the way to Ballarat, came forward diffidently. Tom smiled down on him, his brown weathered face now amiable and interested.

"They tell me, kid," he said, "that you know the horses by their names at this here station. That so?"

"Yes, mister," Buster replied respectfully, looking up at Tom along the slope of the brake-bar.

"Well, I want you to get in Prince an' Nigger an' Star an' Bunty an' June by tomorrow night, for the last coach west. Kin you do this?"

"If I had a horse to go after them I could, mister," Buster said, trembling with excitement. "You see, I ain't got no horse to ride out after them."

Buster White was not employed by Cobb and Co.'s stables in Skipton. He was assistant and message-boy at the local store. But he loved horses, and action, and life, and the coming and going of the coaches was a matter of prime importance to him.

"H'm!" Cabbage-Tree Tom rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Addressing Sam again, he said:

"Lend this boy a hack, and let him get me the team I want. I'll fix it with the manager at Ballarat."

"Right!" Sam said, "I'll see to that."

The coach-driver, with a short nod, turned his eyes to his team, and moved his hands on the reins. The coach was full. With him on the box seat were three men; another four were on the top seat, while inside were two women and a girl, and three men. A pile of luggage behind gave the turn-out a ponderous look, which was counteracted by the presence on the roof of

three youths, who looked down with grinning faces at the loungers and townspeople who had come to see Tom start out.

Cabbage-Tree, as Tom was called for short, straightened up his team, looked thoughtfully at Buster and Sam as if he had forgotten something, then said casually:

"Let 'em go!"

As the men at their heads stepped back, the horses plunged into their collars, eager to get the strain of the start over. With muscles rippling on flank and loins and shoulders, they started the coach. The long whip hissed out to crack harmlessly above the leaders' heads. The team bunched together as good teams do, and away went the coach for Ballarat, where it had to connect with the night coach for Melbourne. Tom had to cover thirty-three miles in two and three-quarter hours. The sight of the coach swinging along on its leather thorough-braces, the smoke of the men's pipes drifting into the morning air, and the creak and jingle of the harness kept Buster White staring till it disappeared among the trees.

"Funny thing 'im askin' you to pick out 'is 'orses," Sam said, "an' you to be the only cove 'ere as knows 'em. 'Ow'd ye get to know 'em so well?"

"I dunno. I just like horses," Buster replied, "specially coach horses. Often I go out with Billy Gray and Hoffman's kid and Tony Glover to Morgan's paddocks playing bushrangers, and I know where all the horses are. It's easy to know their names when you like them," he added naïvely. "I'd like a job here."

"Looks to me like you've got one," Sam said. "These drivers all have special teams used to workin' together. You're likely to be busy lookin' after Tom alone. He's a big man and he might get the manager to give you a job as well as an 'orse. Come on, an' I'll get that 'ack for you. An' you better start ridin' 'er right away to get used to 'er. What 'eight 'orse d'ye like?"

"Not too small," said Buster, "about fifteen hands'll do me. One with some legs to chase those horses."

"You'll have a job. I reckon there's about one hundred 'orses out in the paddocks."

"I know. There's a hundred and eleven," Buster said, as he

followed Sam into the stables and along the rows of horses in their stalls.

The hack chosen was a light chestnut mare, with a blaze on her face and a wall eye.

"She's one of Chirnside's 'Doorkey' brand. One of the best," said Sam. "Not wild, like those 'E.S.' horses from Noo South Wales."

The horses of Cobb and Co. were famous for their stamina and breeding in those early days of coaching, when the roads were poor or impassable, and the loads heavy. In the early sixties, when Cabbage-Tree Tom met Buster White, the firm had some thousands of horses in Victoria, and though there were other coaching firms with teams on the road, those of Cobb and Co. were supreme. And of all the thousands of horses they used, none of them was poor or ill-treated.

When Cobb and Co. took over a run they split the travelling time by half, and their horses were better. The reason for this was that they rarely ran a team for more than a ten-mile stage. Thus the horses were never exhausted as were those which ran for twenty miles at a stretch. Through the hilly country on the 112-mile trip from Hamilton in the west, to Ballarat, the stages ranged from nine miles to seventeen, which was the distance run by the team which had just gone to the stables at Skipton. All the drivers had their own teams except in extraordinary circumstances, and Cabbage-Tree Tom's complaint was one which had often been made at Skipton. So Tom's commission to Buster to gather in the teams he wanted was an important one. The boy listened with excitement to Sam's long-winded talk.

"The mare's a bit light for the runnin' in these 'ills. We call 'er Maggie McKinnon, but you'd better call 'er somethin' short-like."

Buster nodded.

"I'll call her Mag," he said as the mare was led from her stall by Sam. The mare reached her muzzle out towards him in a friendly way, then moved nearer and rubbed her forehead against his chest. Buster stroked her muzzle and she whinnied.

"Come on, Mag," Buster said, taking the bridle from Sam. A saddle was thrown on and the girths tightened. Buster had his

foot in the stirrup before Sam had finished, and with a rattle of hoofs on the stone floor, mare and boy went swiftly out of the stables and along the road.

"Born to it," muttered Sam, watching them go. "He's got 'orses in 'is blood!"

Buster White, whose first name at his christening was William, was indeed akin to the centaurs of ancient mythology. When he went among horses he was one of them in spirit; when he rode, he was part of his mount, or more appropriately it might be said that the horse at once linked up with his mind and obeyed automatically. Clear of the township, Buster found a grass track beside the metalled road and let Maggie have her head. The mare sprang away under him like a thoroughbred. She had a smooth action at a hand-gallop, and Buster was exhilarated when he reined in to a canter. At this pace, too, the mare was pleasant to ride, as she swung along like a machine, with enough spirit to shy occasionally at logs lying beside the road, or at culverts. The country about Skipton was flat and fairly open, with patches of timber on the surrounding ridges, and the day was bright with sunshine. There was a temptation to ride on for miles, but Buster had a sense of duty to Mike Farens the storekeeper, and knew he was due to open the store and get ready the orders which had been left overnight. He turned Maggie for home and came back at a canter.

"What's this I hear about Cabbage-Tree Tom giving you a job?" Mike Farens asked when the lad was busy in the store that morning.

"It's not a job," Buster said, "just to get in the teams he wants from the paddocks."

"Oh! and where do I come in? What about doing that in my time?"

"I'll do it evenings, or in the mornings," Buster replied, "after I've finished here."

"And who said you're ever finished here?" Farens went on. "I pay you to work for me, no hours set, or anything. What about that?"

"I dunno," Buster said, his eyes on his work. A stubborn resentment was growing in his heart. Farens had worked him

night and day and he was tired of it. But he wanted the money till he could get another job. Farens was a hard man, and not too straight either. In the sixties, when these things happened, most of the men in the bush were straight, and Farens traded on that.

"Well, take it from me," he said, "I'll sack you if you spend too much time chasing after horses."

Buster did not answer.

Later in the day he was in the room behind the store, when two men rode up to the place. He heard hoof-beats and knew the horses had been tied to the verandah-posts, while the men went into Farens's office. He heard the clink of glasses, and voices pitched on a low key. They were there for a long time before Farens came to his office door and said:

"Buster, go down to the blacksmith's and get that hammer he borrowed. Quick and lively, now! And on the way back call at my house and get the stamps I left there."

Dropping the sacks he was filling with maize from a big bin, Buster went whistling out of the front door and down the street. He looked keenly at the two horses tied up outside—a rangy bay and a fine black. Both looked well-bred, with signs of speed in their flat barrels, good shoulders and loins, and shapely legs. But it was not his business to inquire who owned them. He went on down the street and got the hammer from Bill Gale the blacksmith, then went to Farens's home. When he returned to the store the men were gone. He made a remark to Farens about them, but was curtly told to attend to his work.

"Kids like you want shuttin' up," Farens said. "Too damned fly altogether. What's it to you who my customers are?"

"I didn't know they were customers," Buster said. "What did they take? Bread and meat, I suppose."

"If you like," Farens said in a surly tone. "What time of the day do you plan to go after Tom's horses?"

"About sunset, not too late. It gets dark quick now," Buster told him.

"All right. But go straight there and back. Don't loiter. I'll want you when the Smythesdale coach comes in. There's some

special freight on it for me." Farens's tone became more human. "And don't get maggin' about my business."

"I never do," Buster said indignantly.

"All right then, don't!"

Buster moved away feeling puzzled. Whom did Farens mean he must not talk about? Those two well-mounted riders, he supposed. Oh, well! He wasn't going to talk about them. For a youngster he had a wise head on his shoulders. Three years an orphan and battling for a living had made him wise, and a trifle hard, too.

Born in Gippsland, William White had lived till he was eleven years old with his parents on a small mixed farm. The products of the place were varied, to meet the demands of the Melbourne market in a day when there was no special concentrated demand for any particular commodity. Harry White, his father, had been a shrewd man and always made a living, even in the hardest times. For a while he had driven for Cobb and Co. Then he had a small stud of mares from which he bred good hacks and light roadsters, and Buster, as soon as he grew big enough, had been his right hand with the horses. One brother, much older than Buster, had soon drifted to the city, and his sister had followed him later. Then typhoid fever had taken both his father and mother, and he was left, a little bush orphan, a bright-eyed, fair-haired lad, whom every one liked. An aunt at Skipton had come and taken him away from the hills he loved and the big timber, and the rivers, and the horses—all the things which made life for him. At first he had pined and fretted, but the ever-interesting daily events of the passing of the coaches had brought back some of his happiness. Then he had got work at the store; hard work for little pay, but he met people and saw what passed in the life of the little township, and as he grew into his teens, he began to have dreams of the world beyond—the world which sent the coaches into the country-side. Some day he would go out into that world. In the meantime, he could put up with Mike Farens and enjoy life a little with his young friends, whose fathers had horses and did not mind their sons and Buster taking some of them out for a ride occasionally. But had the worthy fathers known what high jinks the boys and their mounts had

in the open timber, they would have writhed with apprehension.

"Bushrangers" was the name of the game they played. One side was the police, the other the bushrangers. The horses liked the game, too, for it meant hard neck-and-neck racing through the forest aisles, and every good horse likes a race like that. Perhaps there would be collisions, or hair-breadth escapes—Hans Hoffman was a careless clown—and if at nights the horses were so tired they lay down instead of trying to steal lucerne over the fences of the cultivation paddocks, no one was there to notice it. One of the results of this exciting game was that Buster had become a first-class rider, and one who considered his horse. He was always thoughtful of his mount or team, even in the hardest drive or most desperate ride which he afterwards made in his adventurous life.

The sun was low when Buster saddled Maggie and cantered out along the road to the horse paddocks, two miles out, to bring in the team for Cabbage-Tree Tom. It was later than he had intended to be, but Farens had worked him a good deal with odd jobs which he said should be done before Buster left, and then had called him back at the last minute to give him some instructions about an order. It almost seemed that Farens did not want him to go after the horses. On the soft track Buster put the mare along again, racing with head low and a firm rein to steady her. Approaching the paddock, he saw a number of horses in the distance and began looking them over with his keen eyes, seeking those that he wanted. Then he came into a clearing in the trees, where he had a full view. As he looked his heart gave a jump, for near the fence, hobbled and grazing, were the two horses which had stood outside the store that morning while their riders had talked in Farens's office. And in the same flash of time which gave him that glimpse of the horses, he felt his mount stiffen under him and cock her ears, as horses do when strangers are about. Suddenly there came a feeling to Buster that someone was waching him, someone who was hidden. He looked for signs of men or a camp, but saw none, and all the time he kept Maggie at a slow canter. His mind was working quickly. Suspicion was filling it, induced by the sight of the